Toward Strengthening the Roles of School Counseling

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Counseling has already been institutionalized within school system at 1950s in Korea. As early as 1957, some of the experienced teachers were selected, trained and given responsibilities to prevent juvenile delinquency and to guide students to the desirable developmental direction. Recently, teachers who had completed the special training program have been given professional counselor-teacher license by the government expecting dramatic changes such as decrease of violent behaviors, use of cigarettes and alcohol, drop-out, etc. at schools. However, no one could see the expected changes so far.

No one could demonstrate the evidence of effectiveness. The reality is that even staff members as well as students at a school do not have right information on the nature of services the professional teacher-counselors are supposed to provide. Furthermore, it is not rare that the teacher-counselor candidates do not have clear awareness of their roles expected when they have come back to schools. In short, current school counseling system failed to show the society evidence that it works. Consequently, it failed to persuade the society in general, and in particular, government policy-makers to invest more money and energies needed in implementing the school counseling system fully.

Recently, I had a meeting with an employee of ministry of Education and human resource development. He introduced himself that he was in the position to propose policies for improving school guidance system. At the first part of the meeting, he complained that he had great difficulty in finding logic to argue that schools need full-time professional school counselors. When I heard his complaint, my first reaction was “what further logic we should provide for that purpose?” For a long time, we have been observing serious problems such as increasing rate of school drop out, increasing number of suicide, intentional isolation of a classmate, incidents of violence, threatening, physical and sexual abuse, etc. Empirical evidence that shows seriousness of such problems within schools has been documented in various professional journals and books. Is it an insufficient logic for adopting full-time professional school counselors at school? He continued that although he was willing to propose a plan to dispatch professional counseling staff to schools, the decision-makers as well as his colleagues were against his plan expressing suspiciousness of its effectiveness. Soon it became evident that what he needed was empirical evidence that shows effectiveness of current school counseling system, and its logical argument that it works but we still need full-time counseling staff to see better outcomes.
From this conversation, I realized that we as experts in counseling have missed one thing critical in establishing our professionalism in this society. We have been lazy in showing off our effectiveness. However, we have been busy in lobbying legislatives and policy makers to actualize what we want. We have been doing our best to train ourselves and graduate students, teachers, and volunteers to make them function either as clinical professionals or paraprofessionals. We have been busy in documenting the effectiveness of group counseling methods, career counseling methods, and other counseling methods. It seems like we have prepared everything for what we want. However, when our wish was actualized, we tend to forget one critical mission. That is, proving its effectiveness.

Without exception, we did not provide any data regarding effectiveness of current professional teacher-counselor system. On one hand, we often hear from students, teachers, school administrators, policy makers, and parents that the professional teacher-counselors do nothing. From these sources, we form a negative impression regarding professional teacher–counselor system and judge that the system is useless. On the other hand, we often meet professional teacher–counselors who seem to have great passion on their job at professional conferences, compensatory training programs, and personal meetings. From these sources, we see the other side of the system and judge that the system is necessary. It is the reality! We ourselves who have been arguing the necessity of the system to legislatives, policy makers, school administrators, and the public do not have an objective evaluation data we can rely on. It means simply that we do not know what is going on in this system that we have invented. The consequence of this situation would be fatal, which means the public will not trust our argument as the employee of the ministry of education and human resource development has warned.

Now it seems to me that we need take actions urgently. In my personal opinion, our actions should be started by developing a systematic collaborative research program to see various aspects of school counseling system. It may include several individual studies from different fields of education. However, these individual studies need to be designed under the guiding rules prepared in the research program, so that the outputs can be pieces of puzzle. This work cannot be done by one or two people. It needs collaboration of multiple people who have expertise in various fields of education. Thus, it is important to make leading researchers involve in this project.

I think we will be in a better position to persuade the public to allocate more resources to maintaining and improving the current school counseling system only if we can provide scientific data from this research program.